

Twiddy's

One by one--a neighborhood institution has been dwindling

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Twiddy's: City loses one more

corner store

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It was touted as the "answer to all wash day problems", promising "less rubbing and whiter clothes". And at three packages for a mere 30 cents, no one could argue about the price of Princess Soap Flakes.

Then again, the flakes were on store shelves when bacon only cost 29 cents a pound, steak was a bargain at 22 cents and one could virtually eat meat daily because a pound of sausage was only 15 cents.

But the days of the 19-cent bottle of ketchup are gone, taking with them Huron toilet paper at three rolls for a dime and fancy pink salmon, two tins for a quarter.

Yet whatever the inflationary ravages of time may have done to prices, the passing of years has wrought very little change to one of the city's oldest small businesses.

Located on Moira Street West, Twiddy's Grocery was going full-tilt when the surrounding neighborhood was little more than a nearby hospital and a few scattered houses.

And when Twiddy's doors are locked for the last time Dec. 31, it will mean the end of neighborhood era, symbolic of the steady demise of the small independently-owned grocery.

Over nearly four decades owners Alex and Phyllis Burley have seen changes. And changes. And more changes.

While at one time sugar, oats, maple syrup and even pickling supplies were delivered in bulk to be doled out in individual portions, everything now comes prepackaged.

Ice was once delivered in huge blocks and the insulating sawdust has to be hosed off before the ice was chipped for use in the store. And for decades, deliveries of goods were made by horse-drawn carriage.

That, says Burley, brings back memories of one of the funniest moments in Twiddy's colorful history. A horse used by a milk company spied a plastic wading pool used by the Burley's youngsters. Ambling forward for a drink, the horse kneeled in the pool but was unable to stand upright and ended up tangling itself in the plastic, ruining the pool.

At 75 years old - virtually an institution in itself - Twiddy's carries on traditions unknown at today's convenience stores. Burley, for example, makes twice-weekly deliveries to senior citizens unable to shop for themselves. He is now on the look-out for another store owner to carry on the service.

When told of the store's coming closure, one customer compiled a list of 44 small independent stores that once operated in Belleville. One by one, they've closed up shop for a variety of reasons, leaving only a

handful to do battle against franchise corner stores and the giant supermarkets.

Time, however, also brought changes that weren't so welcome. When the provincial government decided some years ago to charge sales tax on everything, Burley had a "devil of a time" explaining to youngsters - who are among his best customers - why they have to pay extra for chips and pop.

The metric system also caused some headaches but the Burleys didn't let it bother them unduly. They never bothered to have their Imperial scales changed to measure in metric, nor have they ever been bothered by government officials.

"We knew we weren't going to be here forever."

Another problem occurred when the large chain stores introduced their Monday and Tuesday specials with prices so attractive, even some of Twiddy's regular customers were lured away.

"You couldn't really blame them," said Phyllis. "I'd do the same if I wasn't selling the stuff."

The store has been known as Twiddy's for three-quarters of a century but the reason Phyllis and Alex never bothered to change the name dates back to 1947 when the couple took the store over from Phyllis' mother.

In post-war Canada, rationing was still in effect for storeowners. On the advice of a salesman, the couple decided not to change the name and run the risk of being considered a new business, thereby being moved to the bottom of the supplies list.

Over the years, Alex became known as something of a teaser of children. But despite any ribbing he gave them, his former customers always return in later years to see how he is keeping. The latest was last week, when a young woman on her honeymoon dropped in to visit and remind Burley of how he had pencilled a moustache on her rag doll several years ago.

Nor will Alex forget his current crop of young customers. During the last week the store is open, all candy dm. will be doled out two for the price of one.

Alex was a farmer in Prince Edward County when he met Phyllis. He opted to stock shelves instead of plant fields.

Said Phyllis: "I made a better grocer out of him than he would have made a farmer out of me."